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Countering isolation with use of technology: how asylum-seeking detainees on islands in the Indian Ocean use social media to transcend their confinement

Abstract:

Governments detain asylum seekers on islands across the Indian Ocean region, including Australia's Christmas, Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, Nauru, and across the Indonesian archipelago. Scholars and advocates alike have shown that the ambiguous jurisdiction and complex legal migration statuses that emerge in these areas, as well as their remote location and isolation, contribute to their popularity as sites of migrant detention. The negative effects of isolation and remoteness on migrants' physical and mental health, as well as their legal outcomes, have been well documented (e.g. Coffey et al. 2010). We argue, however, that detainees and others are countering the effects of isolation with the use of technology. Ethnographic research conducted on the islands within Australian and Indonesian migrant detention networks suggests that asylum seekers detained in remote sites across the region are combating the isolation of detention with use of mobile phones, internet access, and social media networks. They communicate with friends, relatives, legal representatives, advocates, activists, and members of the public beyond prison walls to transmit information, facilitate advocacy inside and outside of detention facilities, and construct transnational support networks. In turn, punitive policies to discipline asylum seekers by limiting methods of communication threaten these efforts.

Keywords: island, detention, social media, advocacy, technology

Introduction

Governments detain asylum seekers on islands across the Indian Ocean region, including Australia's Christmas Island, Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, Nauru, and the Indonesian archipelago. Distance, remoteness, isolation, ambiguous jurisdiction, and complex legal status all contribute to the continued popularity of these islands with the Australian federal government as sites of migrant detention. The negative effects of isolation and remoteness on migrants' physical and mental health, as well as their legal outcomes, have been well documented (e.g., Briskman et al., 2008; Coffey et al., 2010; Gordon, 2005; Mares, 2001).

In this article, however, we argue that detainees and others are countering the devastating effects of isolation with creative uses of technology that gives them access to social media and

transnational networks. Field research conducted in 2006, 2010, and 2011 suggests that detained asylum seekers are combating the isolation of detention with use of technology. They communicate with friends, relatives, legal representatives, advocates, activists, and members of the public to transmit information, facilitate advocacy, and construct transnational support networks. In turn, punitive policies to discipline asylum seekers by limiting methods of communication respond to and threaten these efforts.

By our use of the phrase technology in this article, we refer specifically to the mechanisms, tools, and media that detainees and those on the outside access to communicate, acquire information, and build social networks. Technologies have changed over time: in 2006, internet access was unavailable inside detention facilities, and detainees relied on letter-writing and landline calls to accomplish similar ends discussed here. By 2010, access to technology increased, intensifying the pace of communication. Internet access facilitated social proximity among individuals and groups located across great distances, connecting people in disparate and transnational sites to enable more immediate sharing of information in real time.

The Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIPB)ⁱ allowed internet access inside detention facilities by the end of fiscal year 2007-2008 (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). Access is provided “internet cafés,” small rooms that detainees are allowed to use at certain times. These ‘cafes’ are not often found in other national settings. Quality of access is an issue (e.g. Amnesty International, 2012; Fleay& Briskman, 2013). Detainees also use mobile telephones even when officially prohibited by smuggling them in through visitors.

Other scholars have documented the importance of technology for asylum seekers. Leung (2007) argues that detainees’ rapid adoption of mobile phone use in detention provides access to

“imagined mobility,” but the Australian government increasingly perceived this use as potentially dangerous (Leung, 2007). The journal *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* devoted a 2013 special issue to the information technology use among asylum seekers. Researchers discussed the capacity of technology, such as mobile phone calls, text messaging, and social media, to better facilitate access to service providers (Danielson, 2013) and mitigate the effects of life on the margins of society (Charmarkeh, 2013; Harney, 2013). While these aspects of the use of information technologies generally produced improved outcomes for asylum seekers, other researchers documented how technology use has become a tool for government surveillance and control (Briskman, 2013). Briskman (2013) argues that Australian detention practices deny asylum seekers access to technology, thereby depriving them of access to social, legal, and family support networks.

As Briskman (2013) has observed, although the Australian detention system holds asylum-seekers in sometimes extraordinarily remote locations, detainees and advocates have always networked and forged connections among detainees located in distant facilities. Thus, the islands in the Indian Ocean that we discuss in this article are connected in many ways to facilities, people, and processes located elsewhere. This results in rich, transnational social movements and social networks working to release people from detention and counter the isolating effects of their confinement (See figure 1).

Mobile phone and internet access prove central to debates over emerging technologies and changing relationships of power. Geographers particularly focus on the ability of emerging telecommunications technologies to alter experiences of time and space (e.g. Hinchliffe, 1996; Pfaff, 2010). Scholarship critiquing technology for contributing to rigid and technocratic forms of development has begun to give way to more optimistic conclusions about technology’s

relationship to power and geography: as Wilson (2007) writes, technology promotes plural knowledge, learning, and respect for differences. Technologies also have the potential to create new spaces. Indeed, the study of technology is powerful precisely, Pfaff (2010) concludes, because technology becomes a *relational* object, engaging both technological and social ways of experiencing the world.

Technology thus becomes an important vantage point into the study of power relations, allowing more complex understandings of distance, nearness, virtual, real, mobility, and stillness to come to the fore (Pfaff, 2010). Gauging the complexities of power relations through the lens of technology becomes particularly interesting in an island environment (Bjarnason 2010). Islands have often been viewed as a ‘laboratory’ for understanding power relations because of their remoteness, yet increased technological connectedness challenges their isolated spatiality. Framing islands as *both* remote and isolated yet also socially connected through technology creates a ‘connected laboratory’ that highlights the relational aspects of remoteness (Bjarnason, 2010). In this paper, technology similarly illuminates the critically *relational* aspects of spatial narratives about remoteness, confinement, and imprisonment, providing a lens through which to read the complex web of power relations imposed upon asylum seekers and negotiated in contestations to their detention.

In our next section, we briefly discuss our research methods. In the subsequent section, we provide information to contextualize our discussion of the uses of technology and social media to counter the isolating effects on detention on islands in the Indian Ocean. This includes information on the islands where detention is carried out, the facilities and populations held therein, the reasons why they are detained there, and some of the effects of detention. Our fourth section draws heavily on interview transcripts and fieldnotes to explain the ways that detainees

and others use technology to counter isolation. There, findings are organized thematically to showcase the use, meaning, and effects of accessing technology. In our final section, we offer conclusions that explore the implications of these findings and questions for future inquiry.

Field research

Material in this article comes from the Island Detention Project, a research program funded by the National Science Foundation with field research conducted between 2010 and 2012 in several locations. The project studied negotiations over entry and exclusion, border-crossing and asylum-seeking that transpire on islands. Islands have emerged as politicized locations where media, politicians, authorities, migrants, advocates, activists, lawyers, and international organizations clash. Research methods were primarily qualitative and included open-ended and semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and archival research in the United States (Guam, Saipan, mainland territory), Australia (Christmas Island, Indonesian islands where Australia funds detention, and mainland territory), and the Italy (primarily Sicily and Lampedusa).

Qualitative methods were determined to be most appropriate for this project. Due to the sensitive and politicized nature of attempts at unauthorized entry, much information on interception and arrivals by boat is either not available or – in some cases – not reliable (Mountz 2011). Furthermore, those intercepted and detained as well as those employed in detention facilities are often either not allowed to discuss their work and life or fearful of retribution for doing so. On Christmas Island, for example, people employed by the company Serco to work at the facilities sign confidentiality agreements in contracts that forbid them from discussing their work. Therefore, from the outset of the project, detention centers were conceptualized not as

Erving Goffman's (1961) closed, "total institution," but as what Moran and co-authors (2013) call "transceral spaces:" institutions whose boundaries are continually transgressed by people, information, capital, materials, and so on. Participant-observation thus sought to capture these forms of mobility and immobility and the ways that facilities were embedded in local communities and transnational networks of people and information. Participant-observation thus included visits to detention facilities and those held inside, but was not premised on 'getting inside.' Interviews all took place outside of facilities in order to not put those on the inside at further risk.

Field research was carried out by a team of five scholars: Alison Mountz (Principal Investigator), Jenna Loyd (Postdoctoral Fellow), Kate Coddington (who conducted research in Australia and Indonesia), Tina Catania, and Emily Mitchell-Eaton (Research Assistants). Researchers returned to each field site for two field seasons over the course of two summers between 2010 and 2012. Over 200 semi-structured interviews were conducted, several hundred pages of fieldnotes crafted, and different kinds of historical and contemporary archives on the use of islands for border enforcement and detention collected and analyzed. Data for this paper were gathered in Australia and Indonesia between 2010 and 2011. Findings suggest that migrants enter into long phases of spatial, temporal, and legal limbo on islands and face restricted access to asylum. This period of uncertainty proves traumatic and depressing, and self-harm, suicide, and collective protest were among the strategies pursued by those interviewed in the research. Ethnography involves detailed study of daily life (Herbert 2000). In the fieldwork carried out in the Indian Ocean Region, participant-observation focused particularly on the daily experience of being detained and of advocating on behalf of those detained. Uses of technology to access social media were not an initial focus of the research, but emerged as a significant finding during the

course of data collection and data analysis.

Figure 1 Map of locations where asylum-seekers are held in detention facilities in the region supported by Australia [approximately here]

Background: detention on islands

Australia has operated detention facilities for asylum seekers on islands since establishing ‘Pacific Solution’ policies in 2001, although the use of islands for migration management dates back to the early 20th century (Bashford & Strange, 2002). This section describes the three main islands used as sites of immigration detention in contemporary Australian practices of migration management: Nauru, Manus Island, and Christmas Island. As of October 2013, these islands housed half of all detained persons seeking asylum in Australia. These remote, foreign or overseas territories are also deeply enmeshed in mainland networks of immigration detention (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013). Our findings, therefore, show how migrants in both island and mainland sites of detention use technology and social media to combat isolation by forging networks that transcend these vast distances.

Although mandatory detention policies for asylum seekers arriving without documentation (primarily by boat) have been in place since 1992, efforts to detain asylum seekers intensified in 2001, when 433 asylum seekers aboard the *MV Tampa* were refused permission to land on Christmas Island, an offshore territory of Australia. The situation prompted the passage of the *Border Protection Bill*, legislation that excised coastal and offshore territories, including Christmas Island, for the purposes of migration, and denied asylum-seekers arriving in those areas full access to legal protections (Bem et al., 2007). In addition, as part of

the ‘Pacific Solution,’ Prime Minister Howard signed agreements with the Prime Minister of Nauru to open immigration detention facilities on the island.

Nauru is an island state with a small economy that welcomed the detention industry as a form of development. Two facilities housing up to 1,500 asylum seekers were set-up and managed by the International Organization for Migration (Global Detention Project, 2013). Between 2001 and 2008, facilities on Nauru housed 1,637 persons (Evans, 2008). Advocacy groups and international organizations documented inadequate access to health care and mental health services as well as many of the negative effects of remote detention detailed below (Gordon, 2005; Mares, 2001). The costs of facilities on Nauru were upwards of AUD \$185 million between 2001 and 2006 alone (Bem et al., 2007, p. 31). Facilities were re-opened again in August 2012 (Global Detention Project, 2013). As of October 2013, Nauru housed 591 asylum seekers in detention facilities, representing about 7 percent of people detained in Australianⁱⁱ facilities (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013).

Detention facilities were also opened on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island as part of the 2001 ‘Pacific Solution,’ with an operating capacity during the 2000s of about 1,000 persons. Facilities were located on Lombrum Naval Base, and managed by the International Organization for Migration (Global Detention Project, 2013). The Australian government spent approximately AUD \$60 million constructing and operating these facilities (Bem et al., 2007). After their closure in 2007, facilities on Manus Island were reopened in August 2012. As of October 2013, the Manus Island facility held 1,137 asylum seekers (14 percent of those in Australian detention). Conditions at the facility have been documented as poor, and detainees lack legal protection (UNHCR, 2013).

In 2001, Phosphate Hill Detention Center was built on Christmas Island, but Christmas Island did not become a primary location for detaining asylum seekers until 2007. The Christmas Island Detention Center was built for AUD \$398 million in 2008, and the housing for construction workers was converted into a third detention facility (Hawke & Williams, 2011). Christmas Island has been subject to similar critiques as Manus Island and Nauru in terms of its remoteness, the difficulties of accessing legal support, inadequate health care, and overcrowded conditions in detention facilities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010).

After facilities were reopened on Manus Island and Nauru in 2012, the Australian government determined that *all* asylum seekers arriving by boat would be transferred to these islands for the refugee claims process. However, by October 2013 these facilities were overcrowded, and the Australian DIBP determined to use Christmas Island as an indefinite holding facility (Taylor & Maley, 2013). As of October 2013, Christmas Island detention centers housed 2,329 asylum seekers, about 29 percent of asylum seekers in the detention system (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013).

As the geographical reach of detention in the region mapped in Figure 1 shows, Australia's geopolitical and economic power in the region enables the country to advance its detention regime in dispersed fashion on foreign soil. Yet in spite of this influence, Australia does face pushback from other countries in the Indian Ocean region such as Indonesia and East Timor (Tillet, 2010).

Many factors contribute to the phenomenon of detention on islands (Mountz, 2011). Islands have always been important sites of experimentation and control (Perera, 2009; Steinberg, 253-265). Physical geography also contributes to their use, as islands become not only zones of exclusion, but safe havens: the closest territory to regions of origin that migrants traveling by sea

can reach to make an asylum claim. Sometimes human smugglers and migrants try to reach islands; other times they are brought there once intercepted at sea.

Yet islands also become sites of offshore migration management because of their remoteness, which mediates access to asylum. Asylum-seekers on islands are separated from advocates, interpreters and legal counsel, human rights monitors, and the press. As a result, island detainees experience prolonged isolation. Further complicating matters is the ambiguous direction and complex governance arrangements on the islands, which have colonial histories and partial forms of citizenship and sovereignty.

Scholars have documented many of the negative effects that remote detention has on those detained, and here we address these briefly as important context to explain the need for and role of technological tools in these settings. Detention facilities are physically difficult environments. Many scholars (Coffey et al., 2010; Hall, 2010; Wilder, 2007) call attention to the poor food, limited health care, sporadic or infrequent access to legal assistance, cold temperatures, and dehumanized nature of detention facilities. Detention facilities are psychologically destructive as well (McLoughlin & Warin, 2008). In just one of many examples of the psychological destruction that occurs within detention facilities, Oxfam Australia (Bem et al., 2007) documented conditions in facilities on Nauru in the mid-2000s, which included:

45 people engaged in a serious hunger strike, multiple incidents of actual self-harm and dozens of detainees suffering from depression and other psychological conditions each year and being treated with anti-depressants or anti-psychotic medication (p. 4).

Detention re-traumatizes a population already, in many cases, suffering from the effects of trauma because of events in their countries of origin. Trauma is a *normal* reaction to the conditions of detention (Robjant et al., 2009, p. 309). A study in the US found that over half of

asylum seekers had symptoms of mental illness, and that the severity of these symptoms was correlated with the amount of time they spent in detention (Cleveland, 2012). Similar research in Australia found correlation between time in detention and rates of mental illness, self-harm, and suicide attempts (e.g., Green & Eager, 2010; Neave, 2013). Constant surveillance, threats of deportation, and the effects of witnessing mental health emergencies, suicide attempts, and deaths create an environment of hopelessness that remains even when detainees are released.

Remote locations and isolation from communities of support exacerbate the negative mental and physical health impacts of detention. Remote locations limit asylum seekers' abilities to access mental health support professionals (Gridley, 2011, p. 3). Island facilities also restrict asylum seekers' access to migration agents, legal representation, community support networks, religious groups, and visitors; impede adequate levels of staff or transportation, and slow processing of claims (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 38). Remote facilities "contribute to the risk of self-harming behavior," the Australian Ombudsman concluded (Neave, 2013, p. 2).

Human rights organizations have criticized Australia for its use of remote detention on islands as well as violation of human rights that transpire there. The Australian Human Rights Commission visited Christmas Island in 2009 and 2010 and recommended closure of its facilities, citing remoteness, poor conditions, detention of children and families, absence of refugee status determination processes, and lack of medical and psychological services available to the almost 3000 asylum-seekers detained there (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). In November /December 2013, Amnesty International (2013) visited Manus Island, proposed as the location for processing of *all* asylum-seekers arriving by sea, and immediately released a

scathing report of poor conditions, woefully inadequate medical services, and inability to process asylum claims.ⁱⁱⁱ

Access to technology provides some mediation – however partial (we do not claim that technology solves any problems) – of the effects of this distance and isolation. In 1989, David Harvey argued that time-space compression was late capitalism’s way of “annihilating space by time,” literally bringing people and places around the globe into closer proximity with the arrival of emerging technologies. Although detention center on islands represents profound, extreme, and prolonged forms of isolation, detainees use technology to partially counter its effects.

Countering isolation with technology and social media

The use of technology within detention centers helps to transmit information, facilitate advocacy efforts, and construct durable networks of support for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers use mobile phone calls, text messaging, websites, Skype, Facebook, and Twitter to communicate with people and counter the remoteness and isolation of detention facilities. Punitive efforts, such as bans on mobile phones and practices of surveillance, threaten these efforts. This section details the uses of technologies by asylum seekers, as well as the disciplinary efforts threatening their use.

Transmitting information

Technology helps asylum seekers in detention transmit different types of information. Communication with friends, relatives, and lawyers produces detailed knowledge about other asylum-seekers’ cases, outcomes, and fates. This information spreads quickly within and between facilities. For example, several individuals in Phosphate Hill and Christmas Island

detention facilities rattled off statistics and outcomes about fellow boat passengers at different times, demonstrating the perceived significance of such detailed knowledge (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 10 July 2010; Christmas Island, 14 July 2010).

Twitter has also become a key resource for spreading information. For example, residents and people in detention on Nauru with access to cell phones tweet under the hashtag #Nauru about asylum seeker arrivals and departures, health issues, and conditions of detention (e.g., Deidenang, 2013).

The accuracy of information may be questionable, however, and detailed knowledge about others may become exaggerated rumors or outright fictions. A lawyer noted that individual case progress becomes grist for rumor mills, causing increased tension between asylum-seekers (Fieldnotes, Perth, 27 July 2010). Knowledge becomes commodified as detainees are desperate to understand the complexities of Australian policy and anxious about their own fate. Knowledge gathered from outside sources, such as mobile phones or Internet research, is valued highly in part because of the extraordinarily poor levels of communication between DIPB officials, SERCO contractors, and asylum-seekers (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 14 July 2010).

People in detention use mobile phone and Internet technology to research legal issues as well. After being accepted as a refugee, but failing his security clearance, one asylum seeker in Melbourne spent hours researching similar cases online, he explained (Fieldnotes, Sydney, 28 September 2011). Yet this research also suffers from questionable accuracy and becomes distorted through rumors. For example, several asylum seekers in different locations explained that they had similarly conducted research into the rationale for building facilities on Christmas Island. Online research led one person to conclude that the detention center had been planned as an Australian Navy facility and that the DIBP would turn the facility over to the Navy

(Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 19 July 2010). Similar rumors occurred at the Construction Camp detention facility, where detainees used online research as well as dishes inscribed with “Made in the USA” to conclude the facility was built and managed by the US government (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 21 July 2010). The strength of these rumors suggests the degree of desperation for information among people in detention, and the extent to which the quantity of information takes precedence over its accuracy.

Technology also allows asylum seekers to relay information about and seek assistance for others en route (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 21 July 2010). Advocates report that they often receive calls or texts from asylum seekers en route to Australia. For example, a Sydney-based advocate reported that a Sri Lankan group of asylum seekers had contacted him from their boat, in distress (Fieldnotes, Perth, 23 June 2010). Another advocate had experienced asylum seekers en route to Australia calling from Malaysia, Thailand, and India (Fieldnotes, Melbourne, 3 October 2011). In a third example, an advocate in Sydney relayed a story of people calling from a boat in distress (Fieldnotes, Sydney, 28 September 2011).

Networks of communication involving asylum seekers in detention, those en route to Australia, and advocates illustrate the increasingly international role of advocacy. One advocate based in Melbourne described a case where she was contacted in Australia by an asylum seeker in Europe.

A person called who was seeking asylum in France. Another person called from England. He was in a room in London, and his landlord was kicking him out in three days. He didn't know where he was and had only a little money and a phone card. The advocacy organization wired rent money to a cousin in England, and got Tamil people to look in on him. Then he called again. He was on the street, and didn't know where he was. People in Australia were able to get someone to pick him up in London using the name on subway station to figure out where he was (Fieldnotes, Melbourne 3 October 2011).

These types of situations made the advocate conclude that, “the refugee problem is a global problem” (Fieldnotes, Melbourne 3 October 2011).

Technology has allowed asylum seekers to maintain connections with family and friends in their home communities even as they are detained thousands of miles away. For example, one asylum seeker detained in Perth relayed the story of a friend, who had last seen his father in Afghanistan 20 years ago. Recently, the father called the family on their mobile phone: he was alive, and had been given refugee status in the US (Fieldnotes, Perth, 3 July 2010). Oftentimes, however, communication with countries of origin is not such a positive experience. Families and friends remain in danger, also often burdened with the debt incurred by sending their relative to seek asylum in Australia. Asylum seekers at the Christmas Island Detention Center were glued to news websites to monitor the situation in their countries of origin (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 14 July 2010). Another Hazara refugee described the experience of her father, who had been living in Australia for six years when he heard news of Hazara families being deported from Pakistan into dangerous conditions in Afghanistan. He nearly collapsed, she relayed, believing that their family had been deported. But they had escaped and waited in Pakistan until they were reunited in Australia (Fieldnotes, Melbourne, 7 October 2011).

The transmission of information, even rumors, in part lessens the dearth of information about countries of origin, family, advocacy, legal possibilities, and asylum case outcomes that otherwise keep asylum-seekers detained in the dark.

Facilitating advocacy

Technology facilitates advocacy and protest inside and outside of detention facilities. Visiting asylum seekers in detention in Australia is impossible without the full names of people

in detention, as well the numbers they are assigned upon arrival, yet this information is not publicly available. Asylum seekers use email, Facebook, and text messages to inform advocates outside detention about new arrivals, including names, countries of origin, and boat numbers in their detention facility as well as others detained in other locations (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island 10 July 2010; Fieldnotes, Perth, 26 June 2010). The importance of names and personal information is critical not only to visit people, but also to advocate for them. Individual stories with photos are the most persuasive and powerful form of communication with the Australian public, an advocate based in Perth explained (Fieldnotes, Perth, 2 July 2010).

Names and stories allow for visiting and awareness-raising, but maintaining up-to-date knowledge of what is happening inside detention facilities is an equally critical part of advocacy on asylum seekers' behalf. Asylum seekers in detention use technology to contact outside advocates about protest actions, health emergencies, and other urgent activities. For example, asylum seekers in Darwin's Northern Immigration Detention Center alerted advocates in Melbourne and Sydney about protest actions underway at the facility by text message, allowing advocates to publicize these activities throughout Australia (Fieldnotes, Sydney 26 September 2011). The DIBP cracked down on mobile phone use in 2010, one Sydney-based advocate explained, because information about overcrowding on Christmas Island had been relayed by text message to advocates (Fieldnotes, Perth, 2 July 2010). In addition, technology allows asylum seekers to publicize urgent health situations such as incidents of self-harm, suicide, or hunger strikes. During an interview, one advocate received a text message that a multiple-day hunger strike in Melbourne had ended, as if to explicitly demonstrate the critical nature of this communication in real time (Fieldnotes, Sydney, 26 September 2011). Mobile phones also provide critical updates to asylum seeker journeys. For example, pictures from a mobile phone

helped to publicize the sinking of a boat with asylum seekers on board in Indonesian waters in 2013 (Jones& Wires, 2013).

Mobile phones and Internet communications become especially important because of the difficulties of communicating with DIBP telephones. As an advocate from Perth explained, successfully calling asylum seekers on Christmas Island is nearly impossible, as asylum seekers are issued only \$10 or 10 minutes of telephone credits per week and prioritize calls to family members (Fieldnotes, Perth, 2 July 2010). English speaking staff also are often unable to relay messages, or even understand the names of the asylum seekers being telephoned (Fieldnotes, Christmas Island, 14 July 2010).

Facebook sites devoted to advocacy and the status of asylum seekers detained in various places have become important resources for asylum seekers in detention and advocates to connect. Advocates publish information about protests, educational campaigns, and other activities to demonstrate their support for refugees; and asylum seekers in turn—usually anonymously—publish information about recent arrivals, protest actions from within detention centers, and health issues. For example, a June posting (28 June 2013) from the “Asylum Seekers on Nauru” Facebook site described poor conditions on the island, explicitly addressing alerting advocates and media:

*Today I went to Nauru hospital for check-up. I couldn't find anything there that I had been seen in normal hospital, I asked, did you have enough facility to help the Nauruan children and woman, do you have MRI, or any other facility they said NO. i you write this demand behalf of Nauruan children and woman that they don't have enough facility to be healthy... Each person who wants help please sent his offer to amnesty international DR Graham Tom or they can contact to Nauruan government. I want to asked the Nauruan journalist to open their eyes and see everything that the people need in their country this is their duty... These are my demand.
One of asylum seekers in Nauru
M.V*

Similar stories are published on Facebook sites such as “Darwin Asylum Seekers Support and Advocacy Network (DASSAN)” and “Asylum Seekers in Manus Island 2013.” Asylum seekers publish pictures, artwork, news articles, and describe the conditions of detention on these sites, engaging directly with members of the media, nongovernmental organizations, and advocacy groups. For example, a 1 January 2013 post on the “Asylum Seekers in Manus Island 2013” site described health issues facing people in detention on Manus Island:

[[[i sent this letter to CNN, BBC, ABC and some other websites, please you do it too]]] Hello, this is the last news from asylum seekers in "manus island" PNG detention. We are about 200 people (man, woman and children) brought here by force from Australia, and we live in a very very bad situation here. We had 5 try to suicide here, in last two days, which no one has seen one of them, but the guard says they're alive. We have women and children here. They shouldn't see this kind of living. We all were a healthy people, but now all got sick, because of very hot weather, lack of medical facility, and maybe because of the pills we're taking for MALARIA. Please help us. There's family here, please help us...

Because sharing these kinds of stories has been so important, advocates have focused efforts on making sure these channels of communication remain open. They lobby for mobile phone access to members of the government and simultaneously smuggle phones or phone credits into detention facilities (Fieldnotes, Perth 1 July 2010; Interview, Perth, 30 June 2010). Phone and Internet access has become a critical element of advocacy efforts both inside and outside of detention. By calling attention to conditions of detention and communicating with advocates about their names and locations, asylum-seekers in detention use technology to contest the remoteness of confinement.

Constructing durable support networks

Asylum seekers in detention develop far-flung, transnational networks of support. Friends and family are transferred to other detention centers, advocates from different cities may

maintain relationships with individuals, and family members may travel to many different places in flight from difficult conditions in countries of origin. People in detention use various forms of technology from Facebook and Skype to text messages and mobile phones to maintain these relationships.

For example, long-distance relationships maintained through use of technology inside detention included asylum seekers detained in one location with friends from detention released and living throughout the country (Fieldnotes, Melbourne, 8 October 2011; Christmas Island, 12 and 14 July 2010; Perth, 26 June 2010). In another example, an asylum seeker detained in Perth rediscovered a friend from detention on Nauru while Skyping with a friend detained in Darwin (Fieldnotes, Perth, 3 July 2010). Boat arrivals also often make non-family connections in the refugee community before arriving, as did a boat of asylum seekers from Vietnam with released refugees in Perth en route to Australia (Fieldnotes, Perth, 26 June 2010). Long-distance networks of friends and relatives help people in detention to relay information about detention conditions and progress on cases and provide personal support.

Yet asylum seekers can also feel pressure from these relationships. For example, an asylum seeker detained in Perth described how his network of contacts became overwhelming after a boat with friends aboard sank off the coast of Indonesia. He received over 50 calls per day with relatives asking about family. It became too difficult to keep the phone hidden from the guards and deal with relatives' requests, so he turned the phone off for three weeks and hid it (Fieldnotes, Perth, 26 June 2010). A recently released refugee living in Melbourne remembered a similar situation. So many people were calling him from detention centers, that he had to get a new phone and discard the old one (Fieldnotes, Melbourne, 7 September 2011). Advocates also feel overloaded by the pressures of maintaining support networks for refugees. One advocate

based in Jakarta described how refugees would call and text her at all hours asking to sleep on her floor (Fieldnotes, Jakarta, 15 October 2011).

Despite these pressures, establishing strong networks of support is critical to detainees' mental health while in detention, as well as their settlement efforts after they are released into the community. Technology use counteracts some of the remoteness and isolation of Australia's detention sites, allowing detainees to maintain and expand networks of support.

Disciplinary measures

As asylum seekers have increased their use of technology inside detention facilities, they have faced increasingly punitive measures for doing so, an implicit recognition of the importance of these forms of technology for advocacy and support networks. Mobile phones were banned in detention centers until 2006, then allowed, then banned again in 2009, according to multiple advocates and asylum seekers (multiple interviews). Bans on mobile phone use by the Australian DIBP and SERCO contractors are one of many ways in which limits on technology use have become disciplinary measures for asylum seekers in detention. The *Beyond Reach* report in 2010 cited "inadequate ratio of computers to detainees, the time restrictions on (already slow) Internet access and particularly the blocking of sites which enable detainees to correspond with people outside of detention" as ways in which SERCO and DIBP hindered efforts by asylum seekers in Christmas Island Detention Center to communicate with people outside of detention (Briskman et al., 2010, p. 6).

The ban on mobile phones was particularly troubling for advocates. In 2010, after the ban went into effect, an advocate from Perth described the atmosphere as paranoid. At one point, only three phones remained with asylum seekers, and although he had tried to text, call, and

email, people were afraid to use the phones and would not answer them. Although they kept the phones hidden, asylum-seekers feared repercussions, believing that authorities knew who had them (Fieldnotes, Perth, 2 July 2010).

Keeping mobile phones hidden despite their ban inspired risky behavior among those in detention. An advocate from Perth related the story of Fashid, who hid his phone in a packet of biscuits [cookies] during a search by guards.

There were three or four chocolate biscuits and his mobile phone in the biscuits in this packet. And the guards had come into his room to do a check, and they pulled out all his possessions from everywhere and put them on a table. And they were going through everything one at a time, and then putting it on the side. And he had this mobile phone in this packet of biscuits. There were two guards in there and they were going through all this stuff... and he's just standing there watching them. And his heart is bump, bump, bump as they're getting closer and closer. And thinking what could he do, what could he do, what could he do? And in the end, he just sauntered over to the table, picked up the packet, and said to the guys do you want a biscuit? And they go oh, thanks, Fashid and took the first chocolate biscuit. Fashid says he went back to his chair where he'd been sitting, took out the next biscuit, so there was still one biscuit and the mobile phone. Ate the biscuit, and then... he just sauntered over to the other side, which is the check side, and put the packet of biscuits over there, and they didn't check (Interview, Perth, 30 June 2010).

Mobile phones have become central to communication throughout the network of Australian operated or funded detention facilities. In Indonesia, one advocate reported that phones operated as forms of currency, and guards sold them to asylum seekers in detention. However, when it came out that one of the asylum seekers was a Shia Muslim, the same guards who had sold the phones to asylum seekers proceeded to destroy them (Fieldnotes, Sydney, 28 September 2011).

Outright bans on communication technologies do not fully end these methods, but send them underground. Tactics of surveillance are additional methods that inspire fear, paranoia, and reluctance to communicate with people outside of facilities. An asylum seeker in Perth relayed worries that online communications are being read by DIBP or the Australian Security

Intelligence Organization (ASIO) officials, who determine asylum success and issue security checks (Fieldnotes, Perth, 2 July 2010). Asylum seekers in Perth had heard that information from emails and records of mobile phone calls had been used to determine asylum, and were very fearful of writing anything that could be used against them (Fieldnotes, Perth, 2 July 2010). Because of these rumors, asylum seekers in Perth delete emails without sending them, and are cautious when using Skype or messaging programs (Fieldnotes, Perth, 3 July 2010). Another asylum seeker in Perth decided to stop messaging with a friend in Curtin Immigration Detention Center because he was too worried about the content of their chats (Fieldnotes, Perth, 24 July 2010). Whether these surveillance activities actually occur is less important than the Foucauldian panopticon as it operates through technology: the *belief* that they provide additional means of surveillance, and the spread of paranoia about the dangers of communicating with friends and advocates outside of detention. Perceptions of surveillance and disciplinary tactics such as banning the use of mobile phone threaten the support networks, advocacy, and transmission of information allowed through the use of technology.

Conclusions

When Mountz began research in Australia in 2006, detainees had little access to technology. Our findings thus present an important case of how seemingly small changes in policy (allowing more access to technology in facilities) results in substantial changes in detainees' and advocates' daily lives. Asylum seekers can communicate with family members and advocates in real time.

In this article, we have argued that recent advances in technology and improved access to technology in detention facilities run by Australia has enabled a rich set of tools to counter the isolating effects of remote detention. We have shown that access to technology allows detainees to transmit information, facilitate better advocacy, and maintain or expand networks of support.

Access to various forms of technology thus helps to counteract or mitigate the lack of reliable information, poor conditions of detention, and isolation that remote and isolated geographies of detention, especially those on islands in the Indian Ocean, promote. Yet this improved access also presents new challenges in the form of surveillance and punitive measures.

The opportunities created by emerging technologies for detained asylum seekers are important, but not overwhelming. While technology has allowed detained individuals to engage with the social spaces of migrant advocacy and create virtual spaces of support, they still face the punitive effects of indefinite detention in remote areas. As Pfaff (2010) and Bjarnason (2010) also conclude, technology use signals changes in how people experience time and space, but these changes are nuanced: spaces may fold, but distance still separates. Through their use of technology, asylum seekers experience the exquisite irony of engaging with narratives about globalization that proclaim ‘nowhere can be an island’—while simultaneously being imprisoned on islands in the Indian Ocean (Bjarnason, 2010).

The implications of these findings are crucial for the well-being of detainees as well as the integrity of the asylum process, one that generally involves legal representation, advocacy, documentation, and the sharing of information across borders. Access to information about families and friends on the outside also helps detainees to survive bewildering periods of uncertainty and isolation. Access to technology thus improves the integrity of the asylum system itself. Broader social movements that are both national and transnational in scope enable those on the inside and on the outside to communicate about conditions, policy and media interventions, losses of life, and legal strategies.

Furthermore, by linking detainees with advocates, expanding their support networks, and sharing critical information, technology extends the increasingly transnational, rich, and

variegated geographical connections solidifying across the Indian Ocean region. Our research for the Island Detention Project has documented the expansion of advocate networks across Australia, Indonesia, and other Indian Ocean region countries as a response to Australia's punitive asylum policies. Technology facilitates that expansion, and allows for people in detention to better advocate for themselves in the process. Indeed, technology offers the potential to blur the very distinctions between inside and out that segregate populations that are detained from populations that are not detained and have freedom of movement, greater access to information, and therefore greater access to representation.

Access to and use of technology and social media profoundly alter the transnational networks and landscapes of power across which facilities, flows, migrations, and associated social movements transpire. The transnational technologies and networks of people and information documented in this article suggest that more topological forms of power are at work globally, replacing traditional conceptualizations of power as either emanating from "top down" or "bottom up" directions (Allen, 2004). Instead, power is negotiated across the boundaries, borders, flows, and fault lines that migrants, asylum-seekers, advocates and activists transverse in their daily work. New technologies offer new terrain for the negotiation of power relations in detention facilities on islands, locations where isolation and connectivity, mobility and immobility are profoundly and provocatively juxtaposed.

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ⁱ The Department of Immigration has changed names several times since 2001. It is referred to throughout this text by its 2013 name, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIPB).

ⁱⁱ These statistics are based on the total numbers of asylum seekers detained on mainland, Christmas Island, Nauru, and Manus Island facilities as of October 2013 (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ At the time that the report was released in December 2013, only one asylum application had been processed among those detained on the island.